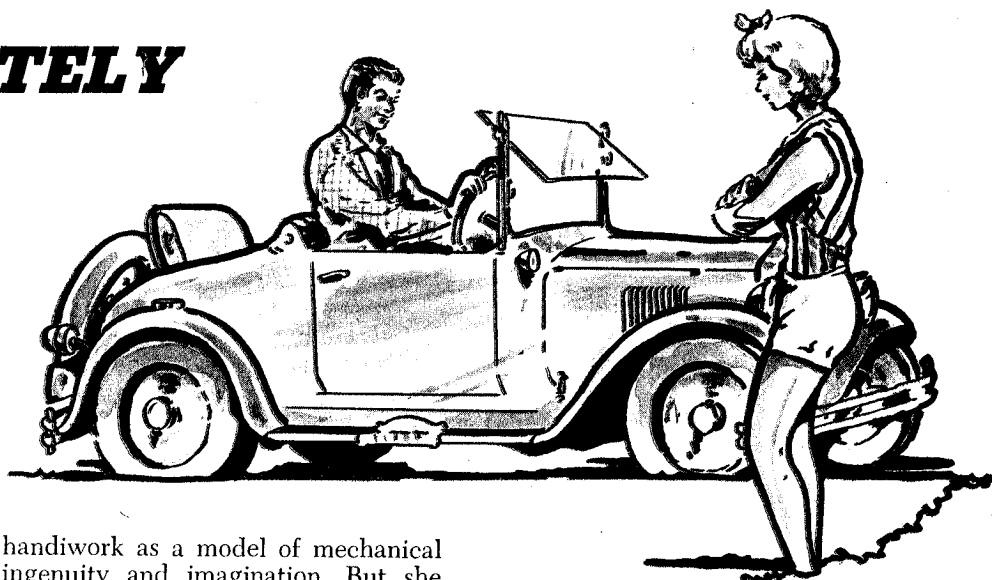




APPROXIMATELY YOURS

By Jack Ritchie



The violet-eyed stare was a bit disconcerting.

Behind the wheel of the parked 1924 - Approximate, Dr. Holding glanced covertly at the girl. She was evenly tanned, she wore shorts, she had been sitting on the bench outside of Ralph's Drugstore filling out picture postcards, he had never seen her before, and she wore a blue ribbon in her tawny hair. He nodded to himself. A tourist. All girl tourists wear blue ribbons in their tawny hair.

Now she put down the postcards and rose, her head still tilted thoughtfully.

Holding's eyes went to Henry's Supermarket half way down the block. He drummed his fingers on the wooden - spoked steering wheel. Why in the world did it take Aunt Agnes so long to do a little shopping?

The girl came two steps closer. She folded her arms and studied the car thoroughly - the rear, the middle, and then she moved to the front.

Holding could endure it no longer. "If you kick the tires, I'll scream."

She indicated the car. "What is it?"

"An automobile," Holding said stiffly.

"I gathered that from the license plates. But what *kind* of an automobile?"

"A 1924 Approximate."

She smiled briefly. "One of a kind?"

The pride of ownership crept into his voice. "It has a 1919 Ford motor. The body is basically 1925 Essex, with the top cut down, of course. The wheels are 1922 Chevrolet and . . ."

"Did you put this thing together?"

With a complete lack of modesty, Holding had always regarded his

handiwork as a model of mechanical ingenuity and imagination. But she had referred to his creation as a "thing," and now he found himself uneasily on the defensive. "Well . . . when Uncle Jeremiah moved to California he left me everything in his barn. It was full of old cars - or pieces of them, at least - and so I thought that . . . well, there's no law against . . ." He cleared his throat. "I get twenty-seven miles to the gallon."

Holding noticed Aunt Agnes leaving Henry's Supermarket. He adjusted the spark and gas levers under the steering wheel and went to the front of the car. He turned the crank four times without any result.

"Aha!" the tawny-haired girl said.

He glared at her for a moment and then gave the crank another turn. The motor coughed into existence and Holding rushed back to the driver's seat.

He smiled triumphantly at the girl as he and Aunt Agnes pulled away from the curb.

Aunt Agnes raised her voice above the clatter of the motor. "Who was that?"

Dr. Holding modified the adjective he had in mind. "A blamed tourist."

Aunt Agnes clicked her tongue. "Now, now, Chris, try to be tolerant. After all, tourists are a vital factor to the economy of this town." She glanced at the bag of groceries between them. "Henry just raised the price of wax beans to 36 cents a can. After Labor Day, it goes back down to 25."

Holding stopped briefly at Elmer's Garage. His 1962 sedan was still up

on the rack, but Elmer assured him that it would be ready by five.

He drove past his office on Main Street and on to the big white frame house just off Chestnut. Upstairs he changed to his swimming trunks and on the way back out he stopped in the kitchen. "I'm going swimming, Agnes. If there are any calls, have Cornelius signal me."

He drove the Approximate down the beach road, passing a scattering of morning bathers. None of the faces were familiar to him. It was always like that during the summer. The natives either opened bait stands, antique shops, or hid until September.

He found a deserted section of the beach, but still in sight of Cornelius' cottage and the bait stand which abutted it.

Holding parked and put the ignition key in the zippered pocket of his trunks. He kicked off his sandals and strolled across the sand to the water.

He hesitated at the rotting pilings of what had once been a wharf. As a boy, he had dived off them hundreds of times. He grinned to himself. Why not?

He made his way gingerly over some of the remaining gray planks and climbed to the top of the tallest pile. For a moment he stood there, king of all he surveyed.

And then he slipped.

He was conscious of the moment in the air, his entry into the water, and then the dull thud as his head struck something.

When he regained consciousness, he found himself lying prone on the sand, his head to one side, and his tongue protruding.

Someone straddling him firmly applied artificial respiration.

Holding proceeded to cough up a painful amount of water. When he finally retrieved his tongue, he managed to speak. "You may stop that now."

Holding felt the pressure released and turned wearily on his back.

The girl with the violet eyes stood over him. The blue ribbon and the tawny hair were thoroughly wet. As a matter of fact, all of her was wet. The shorts and the blouse clung and Holding found himself appreciating the spectacle.

She regarded him coldly. "One would think that a grown man who can't swim would stay out of deep water."

"One would," Holding agreed. "However I happen to be an excellent swimmer. I slipped and fell. My head struck something under the water."

Her fingers began exploring his skull. "I saw your weird dive, but I thought it was just part of your repertoire."

He winced as the fingers touched a painful spot. "Just what are you doing?"

"Checking for a fracture. Hold still. I'm a former Girl Scout and a whiz at first aid and all that." After a few moments more, she said, "Your head seems to be solid enough. But there could be a concussion."

Holding's own fingers verified her diagnosis. No fracture, but considerable swelling. "It's fate that brought you here at this precise moment to save my life. A startling coincidence."

"Not quite such a startling coincidence. I happened to be following you. Or rather your car." Her eyes went to the Approximate. "I just couldn't believe that it existed."

Holding sat up. "I'll have you know that I've been offered two hundred and fifty dollars for that car."

"Really? By some civic-minded citizen who wanted to get it off the streets?"

The sky was blue, the sand tan, but Holding was beginning to see red. "I thank you for saving my life," he said stiffly. "And now goodbye."

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Home," he said firmly. "My automobile and I are loved there."

"I think you ought to see a doctor first. You can never tell about concussions. I'll take you. My car is that comfortable modern-looking thing parked behind your Approximate."

Holding shook his head. "I wouldn't dream of leaving Approximate here alone and unprotected. She might not be here when I got back."

She smiled thinly. "You mean someone might actually go to the trouble of stealing *that*?"

Holding loftily defended the stealability of his Approximate. "Tourists will do *anything* and the Approximate is a prize. This is the only time of the year we natives lock our doors."

She sighed. "Well, you really ought to see a doctor and I don't think you ought to drive yourself. Especially in that." She thought the situation over once again. "Very well, we'll take the Approximate. And I'll do the driving."

They walked across the sand and Holding approached the front of the car.

"One moment," she said. "What do you think you're going to do?"

"Crank the car, of course. It doesn't have a self-starter."

For a moment she seemed uncertain, but then she said, "No. I'll do the cranking. The exertion might shake something loose under that concussion and I don't think you could afford it."

Holding blinked in admiration. "You really *are* taking care of me, aren't you?" He made himself comfortable behind the steering wheel. "Contact."

She gave the crank several turns, but the engine showed no signs of responding. She muttered to herself and tried again.

"You've got to apply muscle," Holding said helpfully.

She spared him one cool glance and returned to her task. After several more futile tries, she strode to the

driver's seat. "Perhaps if you gave it a little more spark you might . . ." She stopped and her eyes narrowed dangerously. "It might help if you put in the ignition key."

Holding flushed. "Sorry. I forgot. Honest." He took the key from his pocket.

She turned the crank viciously twice more and the motor caught.

Holding shifted his seat and let her get behind the steering wheel. "Do you know how to drive one of these?"

"Yes," she said evenly. She was evidently still thinking about the ignition key. She gripped the steering wheel. "Now where is the nearest doctor?"

"Try Dr. Holding," he said. "Decent chap. Make a U-turn." He watched her make the turn. "Did you say you were following me?"

"I was following the Approximate."

"Really? Why?"

She glanced at him. "Have you ever thought about selling your car?"

"The Approximate? Good Lord, no. It's my pride and joy. Do you mean to say that *you* want to buy it?"

"Not for myself. I wouldn't give ten . . ." She switched to a different approach. "You see my father happens to collect old cars. He's a purist, of course. Wouldn't dream of putting a 1919 Ford bolt in a 1924 Chevrolet. But I thought that he might possibly want the Approximate. For laughs, of course."

"I will not sell," Holding said stiffly. "Especially not to anyone who will laugh at her."

As they approached Cornelius' Bait Stand, Holding noticed the bait flag being lowered to half-mast. "That's my signal," he said. "Better stop the car here-for a moment."

She raised an eyebrow, but did as he directed.

Holding sprinted across the road.

Cornelius had seen him coming and finished hauling the flag back up to the top of the staff. "Agnes phoned. She said it was Mrs. Wilson's Cissie. The girl fell out of a tree and Mrs. Wilson thinks she broke her arm."

"Are they at my office?"

"No. At the Wilson place." He gazed across the road at the Approximate. "Nice women you picked up there, doc. But she looks a little wet."

"That reminds me," Holding said. "You don't happen to have any combs?"

"I sell everything these days," Cornelius said. "Ice cream, candy, potato chips, combs. Even bait." He pushed a jar along the counter.

Holding selected a large rat-tail.

"Fifty cents," Cornelius said.

Holding frowned. "That looks like a nineteen cent comb if I ever saw one, Cornelius. I am *no* tourist."

Cornelius sighed. "All right. Nineteen cents."

"Fine. I'll take it off your bill."

Holding recrossed the road with the comb.

"Well, thank you," she said. She used the rear-view mirror to put her hair in damp order. She refastened the ribbon. "All right. Where to?"

"Straight ahead. I'll give directions as we go along." He watched her drive. "Are you staying at one of the hotels?"

"No. I was just passing through and stopped for breakfast. And then I saw your Approximate."

"Turn right at that gasoline station."

Five minutes later, the Approximate clattered into the Wilson driveway, scattering a number of panic-stricken chickens.

The girl turned off the ignition and frowned. "Is *this* where Dr. Holding has his office?"

"Well, no," Holding admitted. He opened the back door of the Approximate and reached for his bag. I'll just be a few minutes."

Her eyes widened as she saw the gold lettering on the side of the bag. "Dr. C. L. Holding? Is that *you*?"

He smiled weakly. "As a matter of fact it is. The 'C' is for Christopher."

She got out of the car and slammed the door. "I've been taken. Definitely taken. Goodbye, *Doctor*."

"Now wait a minute," Holding said swiftly. "You can't leave now. I'll need

somebody to hold the lantern while I perform the operation."

She closed her eyes. "Let's not get ridiculous."

Mrs. Wilson and her daughter, Cissie, came out onto the porch. Cissie was a dark-haired ten-year-old who held her left wrist gingerly.

"She fell out of a tree, doc," Mrs. Wilson said. "I think she broke her arm or something."

"It hurts awful," Cissie said cheerfully. "You been swimming, doctor?"

The tawny-haired girl turned her back and walked down the driveway.

Holding called after her. "Where are you going?"

"Back to my car, of course."

"Wait. I'll drive you back as soon as I'm through here."

"Never mind," she said firmly. "I'll walk."

"But I don't even know your name."

She turned for one fleeting smile. "Smith," and then went on.

Cissie sniveled pointedly. "Dr. Kildare or Ben Casey wouldn't let me stand here and suffer."

Holding calculated rapidly. She'll have to walk all the way back. She won't be able to find a taxi because we don't have any. It should take her at least a half hour. I should be through here before that and be able to get to the car before she does.

He turned back to Cissie. "Now let's see that arm."

His examination quickly established the fact that Cissie's arm was definitely not broken. "Just a sprained wrist, Cissie."

She was disappointed. "I wanted to wear a cast and everybody could write their names on it."

"Better luck next time. I'll stiffen that wrist with some bandage."

While he was doing that, the phone inside the house rang and Mrs. Wilson went to answer it. She was back in less than a minute. "Agnes says that there's been an accident at the cannery. Luke Thatcher is bleeding like everything."

Holding felt the impulse to utter black words, but he restrained him-

self. He glanced at his watch and trotted down to the Approximate.

Ten minutes later, he strode into the main building at the cannery.

Luke Thatcher was not bleeding. He stood patiently with one arm caught in a conveyor belt, surrounded by two dozen awed men.

Thatcher glanced Holding's way. "Been swimming, doc?"

Holding opened his bag. "Are you in pain?"

"Well, not exactly. But I feel uncomfortable."

Holding studied the situation. "Somebody get me a crowbar."

Eli Barton, the foreman, shifted uneasily. "Try not to ruin the machinery, doc."

Thatcher was freed in five minutes and Holding determined that he had suffered nothing more than a dozen superficial scratches. "You're lucky, Luke."

Eli Barton grunted. "He shut down the whole operation for thirty-five minutes."

Holding had the motor of the Approximate running when Barton came out onto the loading ramp.

Barton cupped his hands and shouted, "Agnes just called. The Mason boy broke his neck. Was doing some fancy stuff on a trampoline to impress a girl tourist."

For a moment Holding considered pretending he hadn't heard, but then he took a deep breath and nodded toward Barton. The Approximate turned down the driveway.

Twelve minutes later he found Tom Mason sitting beneath a tree in his own back yard, rubbing the back of his neck, and licking an ice cream cone.

Holding put his hands on his hips. "I thought you broke your neck?"

Tom was mildly offended by the tone of Holding's voice. "Maybe I did, doc. You haven't examined me yet."

After three minutes, Holding picked up his bag. "You'll probably have a stiff neck for a week or so. Otherwise you're all right."

Tom's mother came out of their cottage. "Agnes just called and she says that . . ."

Two calls and fifty-five minutes later, the Approximate once again clattered down the beach road.

Her car was gone. Holding sighed. He'd expected that. How does one go about tracing a girl who says her name is Smith? His eyes wandered to Cornelius' Bait Stand. The flag stood at half mast.

Holding exhaled wearily and stopped when he reached the stand.

Cornelius finished waiting on two teenagers who wanted coke and potato chips. "Agnes has been phoning around. They want you at the police station."

"What for?"

"To identify a lady."

"What happened to her?"

Cornelius shrugged. "I don't know. That's all Agnes told me."

At ten to twelve, Holding parked in front of the small police station and went up the stairs.

Chief Lowell surveyed him. "Been swimming, doc?"

The girl with violet eyes had been sitting on a bench against the wall and now she rose. She was rather dry by now, Holding noticed; and also very angry.

He smiled, "I thought I'd never see you again."

"And you won't," she snapped. "As soon as I get out of here."

Holding turned to the chief. "What's the trouble, Oliver?"

"The boys found her car parked on the beach road. The ignition keys were inside, the doors unlocked, and nobody in sight."

"They *stole* my car," the girl said vehemently.

"Now, now," Lowell said soothingly. "We were just trying to protect your property, Miss. Leaving your ignition keys in an unattended automobile is just asking for trouble — and if we can't find the owner around, we have to take the car to the police station until it's claimed." He turned to Holding. "The thing is, doc, that

leaving your keys in a car is against the law. It calls for an automatic fine. Twenty dollars."

"Doesn't she have the money?"

"Not exactly. She wants to cash a personal check. So that's why I need you to identify her. Especially since she says her name is Smith."

"It is," the girl said. "Megan Smith."

The chief went on imperturbably. "She says she doesn't know a soul in town, but you, and I'm not allowed to accept any checks until I'm satisfied with the identification." He seemed a bit aggrieved. "You'd think that every tourist would have at least twenty dollars cash."

"Well, I haven't," Megan said. "And now that Dr. Holding is here, I'd like to pay my fine and get out of this town."

Holding rubbed his jaw. "Suppose I don't vouch for her?"

Megan's eyes narrowed. "I should have let you drown."

"I'd have to hold her car until she got the cash," Chief Lowell said.

"The point is," Holding said earnestly. "That we can't just let her go off with a bad impression of the town. No telling what harm it might do to the tourist industry."

Megan folded her arms and tapped one foot.

Holding grinned faintly. "Just a wicked idea. All right I'll vouch for you."

"Thank you," Megan said stiffly. "And now if you'll let me get into the glove compartment of my car, Chief, I'll get my checkbook."

When she came back, Holding watched her make out the check. "Are you still interested in the Approximate? I'll let you have it for one hundred and fifty. Providing, of course, that you stay here one week and try it out."

She signed her name to the check. "No."

"Fifty?"

"No."

"I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll *give* the Approximate to you. If you'll stay here one week."

Megan seemed to hesitate.

"You can't beat an offer like that, Miss," Chief Lowell said enthusiastically. "The whole town's proud of the Approximate. Gets twenty-seven miles to the gallon."

A smile flickered on her lips.

"My sister, Ellie, has a nice room at her place," Chief Lowell said. "Meals included. You'd have a nice view and she accepts personal checks."

Patrolman Hirman Watts entered the station twirling a key chain around his forefinger. "You left your ignition keys in your car, doc."

Holding reached for them. "Thanks."

Watts withdrew the hand. "Hold it, doc. You got to pay the fine first."

Megan Smith grinned.

"Now wait a minute," Holding said heatedly. "It's parked right in front of the police station."

"Don't make no difference, doc," Chief Lowell said. "The law's the law. Twenty dollars."

Holding took a deep breath. "Twenty dollars? I'm *not* a tourist."

"Sorry," Lowell said. "But we have to treat everybody alike. Now if this had happened *after* Labor Day, the fine would be only ten dollars."

Holding closed his eyes. "All right, Chief. Put twenty dollars in the town treasury. I'll take it off your bill."

The switchboard operator turned in his chair and took off his head-
phone. "Agnes just called, doc. She says that Mrs. Tarleton just burst her appendix."

"Impossible," Holding said. "I took it out two years ago." But duty called; he moved reluctantly toward the door.

Megan still grinned faintly. "Don't you want anybody along to hold the lantern?"

He brightened. "You're staying?"

"Because of the Approximate," Megan said. "The Approximate."

Perhaps that was her reason. But Holding had the optimistic suspicion that, before long she would take over the job of relaying his telephone calls.

He didn't think Aunt Agnes would mind a bit. ●